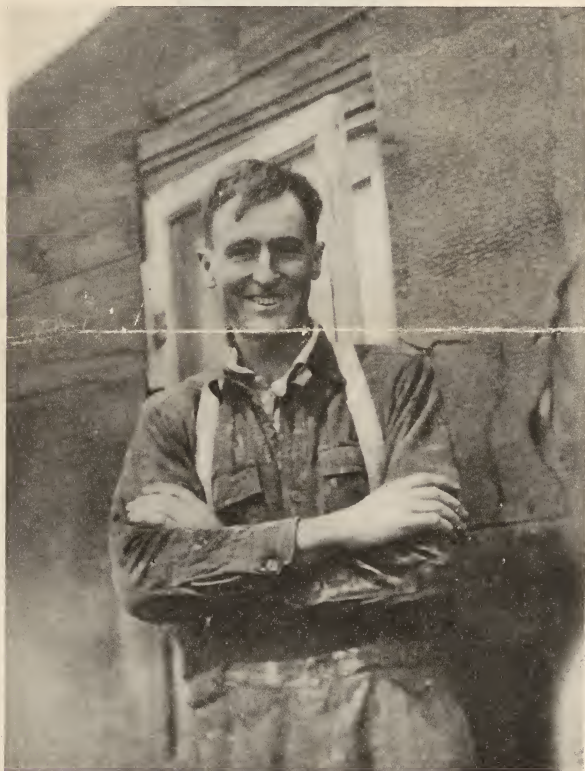


CRUDE OIL: Its Human Cost

A Challenge to Christian America

Reprinted from SURVEY GRAPHIC for November, 1922



HE WORKS AN 84 HOUR WEEK: 12 HOURS A DAY AND 7 DAYS A WEEK



ROBERT S. LYND is well known in New York publishing circles where he has held several responsible posts, both editorial and administrative. His interest in social and industrial problems led him to leave his business connections two years ago for further study at a theological seminary. The facts presented in *Done in Oil* were gathered in the course of a summer's work under the Home Board of one of the larger denominations.

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Done in Oil

By ROBERT S. LYND

THE ELK BASIN FIELD.—The Elk Basin field is located in the northern part of Park County (Wyoming), along the Montana-Wyoming State line, and is about 12 miles west of Frannie. It lies in the Big Horn Basin and occupies the crest of the Silvertop Anticline. The discovery well was completed in November, 1915, at a depth of about 1,100 feet, and had an initial flow estimated at about 400 barrels per day. Before the end of 1915 a number of equally good wells were completed in this field and the development was carried across the State line into Carbon County, Montana. The field was so promising that before the end of 1915 a pipe line to Frannie was planned. The line was completed in May, 1916.

The oil produced in the Elk Basin Field is a very high-grade light crude and is similar to that produced in the Grass Creek Field. The marketed production from the Elk Basin Field was third largest in the state during 1916 and 1917, and since 1917 it has ranked fourth.—(Report of the Federal Trade Commission on the Petroleum Industry of Wyoming. January 3, 1921—p. 18.)



STATISTICALLY that is about all there is to Elk Basin. At least that is all I had been able to find out about it before that bleak May day when I dropped down over the rimrock. Varied reports had come to me about conditions in our Western oil fields, and now for three months I was to see for myself.

"Oil town!" had exclaimed the woman who sat next me as our train clicked its blistering way across the Bad Lands of western Dakota the afternoon before, "Oil town! don't talk to me about oil towns. Three months of it before you? God help you," she said, collapsing into silence.

I looked out at the raw hopelessness of the Bad Lands undulating raggedly off into nowhere—just ground, that's about all one could say for it.

My neighbor revived after a while long enough to add, "I once lived in one of these oil towns. I know oil towns. Ugh! you never get away from

the smell of the oil—you eat it and drink it and wear it and sleep it. See that land out there? It'll look like a green picnic ground to you if you come back this way when you're done."

I dropped off the train at Frannie, the nearest railroad station to my destination, some seventy-five miles south of Billings. Frannie is—about what you would expect from its name; a clutter of frame houses and tar-paper shacks, a hardware store, grocery store, lumber yard and a bank which exists to lend money to the struggling, outlying dry-land farmers at 10 and 12 per cent. It is known to the outside world chiefly as the eastern terminus of the pipe line from the Basin.

"They tell me you are the Elk Basin Stage," I said to the man in a sombrero busy teetering a vanload of assorted freight on a staggering little truck.

"That's where I'm a-startin'," he rejoined. "I'll get there if the mud lets me." A Wyoming road, I was to discover, is more often than not a mere trail through the sage brush, and each traveler has perfect freedom to "blaze his own" to avoid mud and ruts.

At the end of two hours of heavy going across a bleak waste of sage brush we pitched sharply down over the rimrock and slid with screeching brakes down the long Mormon Hill into the Basin. Why "elk" had ever come to that barren hole in the ground in sufficient numbers to give it that name is a mystery I never succeeded in fathoming—or perhaps there was just one elk that strayed in and never got out alive! It was literally a "hole in the ground," gouged out of the naked clay and sandstone, a mile wide, three miles long, and perhaps three hundred feet deep. Huddled in the bottom were the gray mass of the gasoline plant buildings, and a motley assortment of tents, tar-paper shacks and slate-colored company bungalows, while the gaunt skeletons of the oil derricks and the bleak little corrugated iron pump houses cluttered the

fringes. No water, no trees, no grass—not a living growing thing in sight save the straggling sage brush. Scattered over the desolate floor of the Basin between four and five hundred people were living the long six-and-one-half and seven-day week of the oil fields.

The Elk Basin production is controlled wellnigh lock, stock, and barrel by the Standard Oil interests. In this respect it is typical of the situation throughout the entire state of Wyoming, where the Standard Oil companies control "93 to 97 per cent of the total production" of petroleum.* Approximately 87.5 per cent of the crude oil production of Elk Basin is the output of the two Standard Oil companies' one hundred and four wells, while only the remaining 12.5 per cent is produced by the twenty wells of the small independent company, the Elk Basin Consolidated Petroleum Company.† The two Standard Oil companies are the Ohio Oil Company, a Standard Oil company, and the Midwest Refining Company, 89 per cent of the stock of which last is owned by the Standard Oil Company of Indiana. The Midwest Refining Company (i. e., Standard of Indiana), in addition to its crude oil producing business also maintains a plant in the Basin for the production of gasoline by the compression method.

Before I left Elk Basin last fall I took up with John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the question of the unsatisfactory labor conditions in the Basin. Mr. Rockefeller referred my suggestions to R. W. Stewart, chairman of the Board of Directors of the Standard Oil Company of Indiana. Mr. Stewart, speaking for his company, promptly replied to Mr. Rockefeller in these words:

The Elk Basin field is largely owned and operated by the Elk Basin Consolidated Petroleum Company. The Midwest Refining Company owns about 4 per cent of the stock in the Elk Basin Consolidated Petroleum Company. The Standard Oil Company of Indiana owns now about 89 per cent of the stock of the Midwest Refining Company. The Ohio Oil Company may have a small interest in the Elk Basin Consolidated Petroleum Company, but I think it is not substantial. You will thus see that none of the Standard Oil companies has any such interest in the Elk Basin Consolidated Petroleum Company as would warrant their interference in the situation outlined by Mr. Lynd.

That is, Mr. Stewart asserted that the small independent company noted above as a negligible factor in the Elk Basin field "largely owns and operates" the field. This apparently freed the two Standard companies from any responsibility for conditions in the Basin. Mr. Stewart now acknowledges, something over a year later and after the

facts have been repeatedly called to his attention, that his statement to Mr. Rockefeller was in error. The seriousness of the matter so far as the five hundred people in Elk Basin are concerned lies in the fact that, coming from the responsible head of the parent company, his report effectively stalled, for the time being, all efforts from the outside to secure better conditions in the Basin.

The West has a habit of asking no questions—a stranger is accepted pretty much on his own terms, provided they be modest. One fresh from the sophistication of the East is rather taken aback by the friendliness-at-first-sight with which it accepts one, the sort of friendliness that strips off a pair of cotton gloves and gives them to a green man whose hands are blistering under pick and shovel work—you'll know just how friendly I mean if you are ever set to bucking Western hard-pan with pick and shovel with a crew of them! But I get ahead of my story.

I tackled the boss of the Midwest outfit for a job and he passed me on to the "general office" in front of the company warehouse where my history was taken down and I was signed on as a roustabout at four dollars a day—less \$1.35 a day deducted for board. My job entitled me to free quarters in one of the one-story bunk-houses and to a seat at one of the long oil-cloth tables in the mess shack. There was no ceremony about getting settled: one just dumped one's plunder into one of the unoccupied rooms and took possession without the formality of a key. The bunk-house proved an agreeable surprise; at the Ohio camp each man occupied a separate room about seven by nine, walled with varnished tongue-and-groove board and furnished with a three-quarter iron bed and mattress, table, chair and closet, while in the Midwest camp two men were more often bunked together in a room about ten by twelve.

"How are the bugs?" I asked a man lounging outside, who I learned later was a mule-skinner freighting through the Basin.

"Try 'em and see," was his disgusted reply. "Last time I was through here I killed ten in half an hour and took to the barn with my mules the rest of the night. Me for the hay-loft tonight." But I found that his prediction was largely unfounded in the case of the room I drew; in fact one's luck in the bed-bug line depended considerably upon the previous occupant of the room—and one's neighbors, for the partitions were thin. Woe to him, however, who neglected the periodic scrupulous gasolining of bed, walls and floor!

Married men who bring their families into the Basin occupy separate "houses"—I quote the word advisedly, for it takes a good deal of imagination to call some of the tents and tar-paper shacks built by the companies for their employes *houses*. The Ohio Oil Company (a Standard Oil company) is the worst offender in this regard, having only two real bungalows and three or four near-bungalows for a population of some twenty-five families, the remaining families living in one, two and three-room tents and shacks without plumbing or running

* See the Report of the Federal Trade Commission on the Petroleum Industry of Wyoming, January 3, 1921, p. 8. It should be borne in mind throughout this report that the Midwest Refining Company passed into Standard Oil control in 1920 and 1921. It is now a subsidiary of the Standard Oil Company of Indiana.

A later report of the Federal Trade Commission, following complaints from users of oil in Montana (July 13, 1922) states: "The petroleum industry . . . of the entire Rocky Mountain region is dominated by Standard Oil interests. This monopoly was perfected in 1920 and 1921 when the Standard Oil Co. (Indiana) obtained control of the Midwest Refining Co. The acquisition of this company gave the Standard interests practically complete control of the producing, transporting (pipe line), refining and marketing branches of the petroleum business of that entire section. . . . The monopoly is made possible by the terms of the Standard Oil dissolution decree."

† Based upon the output for three typical months, May, October and November, 1921.

Oil Town People



Gas plant caretaker, from Wisconsin



Crum boss, from Wisconsin



Gas plant oiler, from West Virginia



Hasher, from Utah



Wife of pumper, from West Virginia



A couple of Elk Basin youngsters



Driller, from Texas



Gas plant operator, from Wisconsin



Driller, from New Zealand

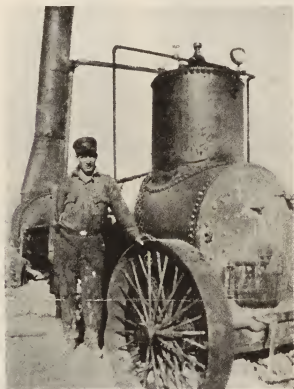
water. In at least one case in the Ohio camp, an unusually fine type of American family of four—father, mother, and boys of twelve and seven—lived in a single-room 10 x 14 tent. In the Midwest camp the ratio is about half and half between bungalows and shacks. The eagerness of the people for more substantial dwellings is attested by the keen competition for the company bungalows whenever one falls vacant. During the long blazing days of the brief summer, the flimsier dwellings are bake ovens, while they have to be so overheated in winter when the thermometer sinks to twenty below as to result not infrequently in disastrous fires. Winter in an oil camp a mile up in the air is no joke.

I was awakened at six o'clock my first morning by "Old John," the bunkhouse "crum boss," coming down the line literally blasting the occupant of each room out of bed with the most adequate assortment of profanity I have ever heard. John had come by his vocabulary honestly in the old days following Custer's raid when he had owned a saloon in a town which he described with a twinkle in his eye as a "first rate hell-raiser." Ruddy and white of hair at sixty-five he drifted into the oil field, where as "crum boss" his tongue still flays small boys who use up his precious store of water by pilfering shower baths in his absence and routs protesting sleepers from the comfort of their blankets. Yet John is typical of the West, for I found him in the wash-house ten minutes later lending ten dollars to a still sleepy roustabout whom he had only the minute before been threatening with death and dire destruction. Later on, when one of the boys in the Ohio camp was rushed to the hospital twenty miles away with appendicitis and a hundred dollars was needed for an operation, it was "Old John" who put up the needed money.

I washed in the hard alkali water in the wash-house, breakfasted with the taciturn double row of men feeding methodically in the mess shack, and shortly before seven checked in at the blacksmith shop and took my seat on the floor with the other men. One had only to look at them to mark the difference between them and the workers to whom one is accustomed in our larger cities. There was none of the heavy detachment so characteristic of the foreign born workers of the Eastern city. With one exception, in fact, they were all American born, mostly the substantial type from the Middle West, and their easy rairery bespoke an open air life free from the grosser fatigues of the machine operative. The unmarried men had many of them drifted in from other oil fields, all the way from Pennsylvania to California and Mexico, or from the soft coal centers of the Middle West, while many of the married men had originally given up fenced farms in Wisconsin, Iowa and Missouri and ventured west in that most precarious of all gambles, proving up on a dry land quarter-section.

I checked out as one of a gang of eight roustabouts and a "straw boss" assigned to pick and shovel work—and the long grind of those weeks in the Basin was begun. I say "grind" not because the

work itself was unbearably hard. Slogging away with pick and shovel at hard-pan soil that hasn't been molested since the Flood is punishing business at best, as is also rod-wrenching in the slimy oil ooze about the mouth of a well. But after all, a job's a job, and one worked at pretty much one's own gait, without the constant speeding up to keep pace with a machine that wears out the machine operative. But it was the drab, blistering monotony of seven days a week of it that bludgeoned all the fight out of a fellow. "When you finish a



ENGINEMAN AND MOVABLE BOILER FOR DRILLING RIG

These men all have a healthy respect for their boilers. After Frank Du Fran was blown up with his boiler last winter one of the pumpers running a stationary engine wrote me: "There aren't half a dozen decent boilers in the whole field. I never stay inside my pumphouse with my boiler for fear of its blowing up"

week's work out here," remarked the man next me as he leaned on his pick one Sunday morning, "you ain't good for nothin' but John D." Jobs like these make one realize how fatuous it is to say that the casual laborer ought to be "interested in his job." During the past year the foreman of one of the Standard companies has been dismissed charged with reputed illicit relations with the wife of a subordinate, while serious charges of a similar nature have been current against another foreman—a condition extremely unwholesome for the entire Basin and making it particularly difficult to hold the men in the bunkhouses in line. But psychology is demonstrating the impertinence of an outsider's blandly applying conventional moral terms like "good" and "evil" to men living and working under such abnormal surroundings! Working all day under a scourging sun in a raw, shadeless hole in the plains

is one thing, but when there is nothing to do after the job but sit and look at the naked buttes, and when this keeps up Sundays too, it becomes "something else again." The Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick tells the story on himself that he recently finished a Saturday afternoon of golf paired with a stranger who was evidently enough impressed with his game to ask Dr. Fosdick if he could not come out the following day, Sunday, to continue the match. "Sorry," said Fosdick, "I can't, that's my busy day." "Huh," grunted his partner, "you must

no trick at all to the condensing and the water in the Ohio camp was good, but the stuff the Midwest men and their families had to drink was so poorly condensed as to turn a white man's stomach. To make matters worse, various rough-and-ready combinations, including, it was stated, potatoes and oatmeal, had been dumped into the condensing boiler to stop leaking flues—which helped to heighten the bouquet of the stuff. The mess shack served tea instead of water in an effort to cut the taste. Raids on the Ohio cistern under cover of darkness proved fruitless, for the wily "crum boss" kept his water padlocked after dark. So those who owned a Ford went twenty miles cross-country to Warren every few nights to bring home a five-gallon can of fresh water, while the rest of us drank the stinking stuff in the cistern week in and week out under the copper sky of that land where it never rains.

The only shower bath in operation in the Basin during the past spring and early summer was the one down in the Ohio washhouse—which was not open to Midwest men—for the shower at the Midwest bunkhouse had been frozen up some time early in the preceding winter and the local foreman had never taken the trouble to open it up again.

"Good God," growled a man, oil-soaked from head to foot, trying to wash in a bucket of water before supper, "life would be a little bit better around here if we could get a bath once in a while."

"Huh," said another fellow, laboriously scraping the day's accumulation of paraffine off his clothes with his jack-knife, "I'd like to see a state inspector of hygiene come in here."

It appears that the men were afraid to broach the matter of re-opening the shower to the foreman for fear of being fired, a situation standing out in raw contrast to the industrial representation plan set forth in the booklet issued by the Midwest Company and in operation in the Salt Creek field.

Least defensible of all the sources of protest in the Basin, however, is the long week that includes Sunday work.

"While John D. was a-sittin' on a soft cushion in church last Easter morning praisin' God for his goodness to him," remarked one of the men in the bunkhouse with the easy tendency of the workman to personify the corporation for which he works, "I was pullin' a well out here in the worst blizzard of the winter that made my hands freeze to everything I touched."

"Why this seven-day week?" I asked Harry Stanley, a leather faced old-timer originally from the Standard Oil fields at Findlay, Ohio.

"There ain't no need of it," he replied. "In Findlay even the pumpers come off 'tower' at a quarter before twelve Saturday night and are off unt' midnight Sunday. The trouble is they've forgotten what Sunday is out here."

Just how unnecessary the bulk of the Sunday work is may be seen from the report on Wages and Hours of Labor in the Petroleum Industry just issued by the U. S. Department of Labor.* In the



OIL SMEARED FROM HEAD TO FOOT

As an oil well is drilled it is "cased in" with pipe to prevent cave-ins. Later a string of one-inch tubing is lowered and inside it a string of steel rods, going the full depth of the well—1500 to 2000 feet. On the bottom rod is a working valve, which sucks in the oil. The "jack" which lifts the rods appears in the upper right hand corner. Every week or ten days the entire string of rods has to be removed, to replace the worn washers in the valve; the man here shown, a "rod wrencher," screws each section loose from its predecessor as it emerges

have a hell of a job." Working for the Standard Oil Company seven days a week, is "a hell of a job" in that respect, too.

Western folk are used to loneliness and take it philosophically, making the most of their meager resources. But bit by bit, squatting by one of the men for a moment after walking up the line to get a shot of stale water from the water bag, or in the long evenings after work in the shadow of the bunkhouse, I sensed the wear and tear of the hardship of the life in the Basin. The drinking water was a constant source of protest among the men and their families in the Midwest camp. The only water in the Basin was alkali water pumped from wells two miles away and condensed for drinking. There was

* "Wages and Hours of Labor in the Petroleum Industry—1920." Being Bulletin No. 297 of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. Issued April, 1922.



"Fifth Avenue," Elk Basin, with Midwest bunkhouses, mess shack, warehouse and garage in the foreground. This is the "tony" end of the Basin and in sharp contrast to the Ohio camp. A part of the Midwest tar paper shack colony—comprising approximately half their personnel—appears in the back-ground to the left

tables given below note that whereas the great majority of the workers in the first district (New York, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia) work only a six-day week, in the districts further west the overwhelming majority of the workers labor a seven-day week.† In other words, the seven-day week in oil is not dictated by conditions in the industry necessitating continuous operation—except in emergencies ‡—but by the unwillingness of the operators to recognize the need of one day's rest in seven.

Numbers of Oil Workers Working 6 and 7 Day Week—Classified by Occupation and Geographic District *

	Days per Week	Drillers	Drillers' helpers	Clean-out men	Laborers and helpers	Section men	Pumpers and engine drivers	Tool dressers
N. Y., Penn., W. Va.	6 days	152	189	1406	1007	165		
	7 days	55	28	245	161	61		
Ill., Ind., Ky., Ohio.	6 days	9	2	55	43	9		
	7 days	175	25	758	1192	182		
Kansas, Mont., Okla., Utah, Wyo.	6 days	16	121	2559	397	15		
	7 days	831	175	2495	1755	816		
Ark., La., Tex.	6 days	18	41	366		20		
	7 days	1012	1772	3244	2021	409		
Cal.	7 days	307	378	785	626	217		

This table means, if we take the first column, the drillers, that whereas 152 of them in the East work a six-day week and only 55 a seven-day week, in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas only 18 work a six-day week and 1012 a seven-day week, while in California there are only seven-day workers. Multiply all figures by four. The Government survey covered only 25% of the workers.

R. W. Stewart, chairman of the Board of Directors of the Standard Oil Company of Indiana, assured me, since my return, in the course of a con-

† The Bureau of Labor Statistics classifies all workers laboring six-and-one-half days a week with the seven-day week workers.

* An "open hole," i. e. well in process of being drilled, frequently cannot be left standing idle because of the lateral pressure which causes cave-ins.

* Pp. 90-2. I have selected here only the five classes of labor bulking largest numerically. The Government's statistics do not cover the entire industry. "The report is not intended to be a census of the petroleum industry, but every possible effort has been made to apportion the work so as to obtain a fair representation of the industry in each section of the country where it has been developed to any considerable extent. Representative establishments were selected, attention being given to both large and small plants as well as to general location; that is, whether in industrial centers or in isolated sections, because all these conditions influence in some degree the wages paid and the hours worked. . . . Schedules were obtained from 62 companies and 16 states engaged in the drilling and operation of oil wells, employing 35,255 males, estimated to be 25 per cent of the total number of such employees in the United States." (Statistics are also given for pipe lines and refineries in the Federal Bulletin quoted.)

ference with him regarding working conditions in Elk Basin, that although the Standard of Indiana owns at least eighty-nine per cent of the stock of the Midwest Refining Company, it is powerless to interfere in such matters as working conditions—a bit of "passing the buck" which I at once challenged. Later he took the position that it is financially undesirable for the Standard of Indiana to interfere in such details as working conditions under its subsidiary company so long as the latter is running smoothly. It is of interest to note in this connection that the

Federal Trade Commission's tentative revision of the net earnings on net investment of the Midwest Company for the last three years for which figures are given shows 43.2, 50.6 and 44.4 per cent respectively, while the Indiana Company, due to stock dividends of 2,900 and 150 per cent, is paying 4,500 per cent on its original investment.

In the letter to Mr. Rockefeller, Jr., referred to above, Mr. Stewart wrote:

As you know, both the Standard Oil Company of Indiana and the Midwest Refining Company in their operations in the Wyoming Oil Fields are committed to a six-day week of eight hours each, wherever it is possible to operate on that line. Generally speaking, this principle is observed also by the Midwest Refining Company. In fact I am advised by the head of the Midwest Refining Company that the only place where it is not observed is where the workers themselves have petitioned otherwise. [Italics mine.]

Mr. Stewart also assured me verbally that the workers in the Basin realize that the Elk Basin field will probably be abandoned after a number of years and are therefore anxious to work seven days a week while the work lasts—something like the painter who was hurrying to finish before his paint gave out, I suppose! During my three months in Elk Basin, I talked to no man who did not prefer a six-day week, nor did I find a solitary man who knew anything about the companies having been petitioned



Elk Basin boys

to allow the men to work seven days a week. Not only is Sunday work well-nigh universal, except in the East, but the hours worked per day by certain classes of workers throughout the oil industry match Mr. Gary's notorious "twelve-hour shift in steel." The "Industrial Relations Plan" of the Standard Oil Company of Indiana states in Part D, section V:

"In order effectively to safeguard the welfare, health and proper comfort of workers, and to promote efficiency, the Company will continue to regulate the employment of its labor on the basis of an eight-hour day except where otherwise agreed upon."

In Elk Basin all pumpers, drillers and tool dressers of all companies—roughly one man in three—work a twelve-hour day seven days a week. For a few of the pumpers it is a twenty-four hour shift—and in the case of the Ohio workers, who get no holidays, 365 days in the year! These few men are stationed at the more remote pump-houses and are responsible for keeping the pump going day and night; they "batch" it alone in their drab little corrugated iron shacks off in the sage brush; if they desire for any reason to leave the Basin for a day they must hire a substitute from their own wages. In addition to the seven-day week in the producing end of the field, all engine tenders, oilers and stillmen (i. e. all classes of skilled labor) at the Midwest Gasoline Plant work an eight-hour day seven days a week. All other classes of labor, in both the producing end and gas plant, including office personnel, work a nine-hour day six and one-half days a week. In fact, one of the steadiest men in the Basin was docked recently for not being on the job the night his wife was delivered of a baby down in their rude little shack. There is no overtime pay for the occasional emergency work. The following figures issued this spring by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics tell a grim story regarding the "long shift in oil."



Clean-out machine and crew

Average Full-Time Hours Per Week of Oil Well Workers Classified by Occupation and Geographical District†

	Days per Week	Drillers	Drillers' helpers and section men	Laborers	Knustabouts and section men	Pumpers and engineers	Tool Dressers
N. Y., Penn., W. Va.	6 days	71.0	55.5	49.1	54.3	71.4	
	7 days	84.0	83.0	61.7	61.5	84.0	
Ill., Ind., Ky., Ohio.	6 days	72.0	57.0	57.3	56.0	72.0	
	7 days	84.0	84.0	62.1	62.9	84.0	
Kansas, Mont., Okla., Utah, Wyo.	6 days	56.3	51.5	51.4	48.6	56.4	
	7 days	83.6	80.7	63.4	70.3	83.7	
Ark., La., Tex.	6 days	54.0	54.0	53.2		54.0	
	7 days	69.3	58.8	61.6	64.4	80.5	
Cal.	7 days	56.0	56.0	56.0	56.0	56.0	

Here again, taking the first column, the drillers, this means that the average total hours worked per week by all drillers in the New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia fields who work a six-day week is 71, while those working the seven-day week average 84 hours. Stop a minute and figure up in terms of your own 44 or 48 hour job just what that means!

The needlessness of the long shift in oil is shown by the President's Mediation Commission in 1920 in the California oil fields which provided that, "Eight hours actual work at the plant or place of employment shall constitute the work day in the oil industry." *

While the above tables epitomize conditions with regard to the twelve-hour day and the seven-day week in Elk Basin, they point out even more definitely the situation as it exists today throughout the producing end of the entire oil industry, both among the Standard companies and among the independents. This schedule is more extreme than that which prevails generally in the refineries, where the three-shift system is common, and contrasts sharply with the three-shift day and one-day-of-rest-in-seven in which the Rockefeller interests (Colorado Fuel and Iron Company) have been among the pioneers in the steel industry. It is difficult to fix the original responsibility for the long shift in oil—it grew up with the industry. But certain it is that a large share of the responsibility for its continuance must



Drilling crew coming off shift at No. 36

† "Wages and Hours of Labor in the Petroleum Industry," pp. 90-2.

* See "Memorandum of Terms Governing the Relations of Operators and Workmen in Oil and Gas Producing Companies, Oil and Gas Pipe Line Companies, Companies Operating, Cleaning, Topping, Dehydrating and Gasoline Plants, Contracting Drillers and Refining Companies in the State of California, as Determined by the President's Mediation Commission and the Committee of Such Operators."



"Literally a 'hole in the ground,' gouged out of the naked clay and sand stone. No water, no trees, no grass—not a living, growing thing in sight save the straggling sage brush"—a general view of Elk Basin. At the left is well No. 36



rest upon the shoulders of the Standard Oil group, for the twenty-three large independent producers, and of course the little fellows, follow in the main Standard practices: "The members of the Standard Oil group," according to the Federal Trade Commission, "are the dominating factors in the petroleum business of practically every section

of the United States. In 1919 the various Standard companies controlled 23½ per cent of the total crude petroleum production of the entire country, they operated about 68 per cent of the pipe lines, refined almost 44 per cent of the total quantity of crude refined, while Standard marketing companies were the dominating factors in both the domestic and export trade of the entire country. As in California, *Standard crude petroleum purchasing and Standard marketing companies usually take the lead in announcing price changes, while others follow.*" While it is not meant here to imply that the Standard as a minority producer can dictate the labor policy of its competitors, it is plain that the financial power of the Standard companies and the strategic position of their pipe lines and refineries in the various fields tend to discourage any such advance beyond the Standard level in working conditions as would increase the overhead of the outside competitor. That at least certain of the more prominent Standard Oil companies could afford to set the pace in a general shortening of hours

and days per week may be inferred from the earnings of the Midwest and Standard of Indiana cited above, and from the Federal Trade Commission's revised schedule of earnings of the Standard of California for the last three years cited, 1917, '18, '19: 24.8, 34.1 and 30.8 per cent respectively.*

The vacation policy of the Midwest Company in Elk Basin is to be commended—one week with pay after a year's service and two weeks with pay after two years. Here again, however, as in the case of housing and general care of its employes in sickness, the Ohio Company lags behind the Midwest, for it grants no vacations at all with pay in the Basin. The Midwest, through its Industrial Relations Department, also provides free company insurance up to two thousand dollars and a compulsory sick benefit plan whereby a dollar a month is deducted from each man's pay and he receives two dollars-and-a-half a day after seven days' sickness for a period of twenty weeks. Another noteworthy evidence of Midwest welfare policy is the small but clean two-bed infirmary and the doctor sent into the Basin at the company's expense—in neither of which does the Ohio Company cooperate. All Midwest employes are treated free by the doctor and their families are cared for at a nominal scale fixed by the company. The Midwest Company also keeps a traveling library of fifty books in the Basin.

Hard as the long day and the seven day week are on the men, however, I sympathized even more with the women and children of the Basin. Elk Basin is not only over a dozen miles from the railroad, but twenty miles over rutted trails to even the nearest "movie" show. And while the men have the rough

* See editorial pages for recent earnings of various Standard companies.

pool hall where they while away the evenings gambling mildly, for the women the days crawl endlessly by. In winter they are snowed in for weeks at a time. "Last winter," one mother of a family of five told me, "the snow was so deep that I didn't get out of our front door for six weeks." While during the brief summers they keep indoors while the sun blazes down as it only can in a treeless country where cloudy days are almost unknown. Someone has said that "it is always three o'clock in the afternoon in hell"—and it seemed always three o'clock in the afternoon in those sun-burned little shacks of the Basin. I recall a visit I paid to a patient girl-mother who had just been delivered of a still-born baby; I had dropped by one noon to see if there was anything an outsider could do. She lay in the bare little living-room-bed-room-everything-but-kitchen, smiling pluckily while the flies blackened the sheet and a rod line screeching back and forth over the parched ground outside the door added to the nausea of the heat. Several doors away in another two-room tar-paper shack all four children were down with whooping cough and the gaunt mother with her hair stringing about her face told me with a tired smile that she guessed there wasn't much else that could happen to them now. I used to wonder when I was new in the Basin at the extravagance of the mother of a family of six living on a salary of less than five dollars a day who paid two dollars for a watermelon, or at the expensive looking victrolas in one- and two-room shacks, or how some of the families could afford even a battered Ford (about one family in every three has some kind of cheap automobile). But these things are literally more necessary than bread and potatoes and shoes—they afforded the same imperative relief that the boy next me in the bunk-house, a fine, clean fellow of nineteen grinding along twelve hours on and twelve off seven days a week, got the night he went over to Red Lodge with a crowd and got on his first big drunk.

There were occasional dances in the pool hall but these were sometimes uneasy times for certain of the wives for the dances were apt to bring boot-leggers into the Basin. In the course of the summer some of us launched a series of community sings which were eagerly attended—people sometimes actually standing outside the crowded little schoolhouse and singing in through the windows. The most obvious social need of the Basin had long been recognized to be, however, a community house where the women could sit and sew with each other during the day and there could be informal dancing and games at night; a rough basket ball floor would go far toward solving the recreation problem of the men in winter. The companies had been repeatedly petitioned to build some simple community house such as the Midwest Company has

erected in other fields. At length we subscribed six hundred dollars among ourselves toward the cost of the building, but even this concrete suggestion met with the profound silence of Don Marquis' "rose petal dropped into the Grand Canyon."

During the past summer, due to the energetic work of M. Huyett Sangree, a minister temporarily stationed at Elk Basin by the Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church, the matter was again pushed with the companies. The Midwest Company (Standard of Indiana) responded with an offer of five hundred dollars, contingent upon the Ohio Company (Standard) contributing a similar amount. The scheme was again promptly knocked in the head, however, through the Ohio Oil Company's refusal to cooperate. The reason advanced by Mr. McFadyen of the Ohio Company in his letter of refusal—because "the price of oil has gone off" temporarily—would be highly amusing, in view of the fact that the Ohio Oil Company's stock sells at over \$300 and it has just declared a 300 per cent stock dividend, were his refusal not the cause of such bitter disappointment to the people of the Basin.

Many of the families of the Basin are substantial American folk whose children might go to college in a more favored community. And it was to the problem of their children that these earnest, patient people of the West recurred most often in the evenings as we sat about the doorstep while the dying sun splashed the western sky with color. For the girls, unless they left home after finishing the eight grades of schooling available in the Basin, there was nothing ahead except work as a "hasher" for the rude crew in the mess shack or marriage to one of the unmarried men in the bunk-house and—the oil fields throughout all their lives too. For the boys the future was less problematical: they hung around the pool hall learning to grow up fast and eventually signed on as roustabouts. During the summer we



A familiar figure in the Basin, who has outmaneuvered the oil companies in their attempts to gobble up the oil rights on her near-by homestead. She slept in the sage-brush in the early days until her house was built, and for five years has hung on, burning sage-brush to keep warm during the long winters when it is twenty below, and carrying drinking water from the Basin two miles and a half away, her whole life narrowed to a single consuming passion—to beat the oil companies. She is hanging on, strong in the faith that there is a "river of oil" under her homestead—and there is a good chance that she will strike oil with her "wild cat" drilling company, now at work. She has posted the sign shown above, threatening dire destruction to any man or beast of the oil companies that comes upon her property, and stands by with her six-shooter at her belt

organized scout troops for both boys and girls, and after the lay-off came, I took the boys off for a couple of hilarious camping trips. "It's been the first summer our streets haven't been full of howling young hoodlums," said one woman. But these things of course did not get at the real problem of the children in a place like the Basin.

Perhaps the healthiest thing about life in Elk Basin is the passion of young and old for trout fishing. Forty miles away over straggling trails are two trout streams—and TREES and GRASS! In winter the people live for the coming of summer and during the brief summer they hang on through the heat by the thought of the next fishing trip to Pryor or the Canyon. And those of them who do not work the twelve hour shift and are lucky enough to own some form of conveyance make the best of their brief half-day on Sunday. One man who works an eight hour day seven days a week at the Midwest Gasoline Plant used frequently to come off his shift at midnight, hop into his dilapidated Ford, do the forty miles through the night up the ghostly Pryor canyon, squat on the bank till dawn, and then fish until it was time to come scorching back to check in on his four o'clock shift without sleep.

Day followed day in the Basin in glaring procession: up at six, breakfast, on the job at seven, dinner at twelve-fifteen, on the job again at one, supper at five-fifteen, sit about a while, sleep, up at six, breakfast, on the job,—and so on and on and on, hemmed in forever by that grey circle of rimrock. Occasionally the monotony would be varied, as when Frank Du Fran was blown up by a defective boiler, or one of the tar-paper houses went up in flames while the neighbors stood helplessly by without water or fire-fighting apparatus, or there would be a fight as when "Big Joe" and his helper settled the question as to which was to be boss down at the test rig, or there would be an occasional dance or birthday party, or a meeting of the "Ladies Aid" (there is no church building and no regular services in the Basin), or a collection would be taken up for somebody sick or stranded (an appeal, by the way, to which people never failed to respond magnificently—a subscription of \$300 being by no means unknown). These things caused a slight commotion, which immediately flattened out, however, into the dead calm of "all work and no play."

"Why don't you organize?" I asked a man one evening as we sat on a bench against the bunk-house. "Organize" hell—try it and see," was his laconic reply.

It appeared that two men had tried it two years ago and had lasted only about two weeks on their jobs. A recent notice of a wage cut posted in the blacksmith shop had been accompanied with the pregnant suggestion that anybody not satisfied could get out. I gradually discovered that the men were almost universally in favor of organization but in mortal terror of the companies' finding them out. There was a clause in the California agreement referred to above providing that "membership in any labor union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor shall not be a bar to employment, nor

shall any man be discharged or discriminated against for membership in such labor union," but needless to say such consideration was out of the question in the Basin. The very problem of finding ground on which to hold a meeting in a town one hundred per cent owned by the companies is in itself almost prohibitive. Subsequently organizers have again entered the Basin, only to give it up as a bad job.

"Shorty" stopped one day as we were digging and, leaning on his pick, remarked, "Well, I guess some of us'll be goin' down the road talkin' to ourselves pretty soon." And he was right: the temporary cut in production ordered in a distant office where Elk Basin was only a spot on the map reached into the Basin one morning and the lay-off began. It sent "Shorty" down the road "talkin' to himself," a boy of twenty-three shunted on to the next job in the haphazard career of the casual laborer; Charlie went north into the wheatfields, leaving his wife behind in the rusty little shack; Hugh got a railroad job, leaving his wife and two boys in their one-room tent. One by one they drifted up over the rimrock and the uneventful life of the Basin assumed a semblance of excitement as we speculated as to who would be plucked next. I find an entry in my notebook: "Seven more men laid off today. Things pretty blue around the bunkhouse."

WHEN I finally came out of the Basin there was no question in my mind as to what should be done. These things are urgent:

First: A six day week, with Sunday work only in real emergencies.

Second: Abolition of the long twelve hour day and the substitution of three shifts instead of two as in the California agreement cited above.

Third: Provision of a simple community house for recreational purposes.

In addition to these, there is an unquestioned need for:

Fourth: Recognition, as in the California agreement, of the right to organize.

Fifth: Better housing for from fifty to eighty per cent of the families.

Sixth: Extra pay for overtime work.

All of the above six needed changes are bound to come.

But owing to its isolated location, conditions in the Basin will always tend to lag behind those in more favorably situated fields. Its very isolation however, with the inevitably increased hardship of its living and working conditions, ought to enlist in its behalf a first call in the allocation of company community halls and other welfare facilities. For improvement in hours of labor and the archaic seven-day week it will doubtless have to wait until public opinion forces a betterment of conditions throughout the entire oil industry.

Meanwhile the merry-go-round of the seven-day shift goes on:

"Brutal, ain't it," remarked a workman to me the other day, "I'd as soon be dead."

A Promise of Better Days

By JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, JR.



L GREATLY appreciate the editorial courtesy which has permitted me to read and to comment upon Mr. Lynd's article in advance of publication. The conditions described have caused me deep concern. The first intimation months ago that such a situation existed in the Elk Basin field led me to institute prompt inquiry, with the hope that any just grounds for criticism might be removed forthwith. That these efforts, long since under way and still in progress, have not been more quickly effective has been and is a disappointment.

While I recognize the tolerance and restraint of the article, I should regret if the omission of safeguarding references might lead readers to infer that the Elk Basin situation is typical of the oil industry as a whole or of the policies of the Standard Oil companies in particular, for quite the contrary is the fact. It is hardly necessary for me to call attention to what has long been very generally conceded among employers and employees alike, namely, that the Standard Oil companies have always paid full wages and treated their men with justice, friendliness and consideration. I think it will be recognized that the Elk Basin is a peculiarly barren, isolated and difficult location in its physical setting. According to information from responsible sources, I have reason to believe that the unhappy circumstances apparently surrounding this single field are in marked contrast with those in other branches of the industry, and especially those in less difficult producing areas.

Having, however, thus pointed out that these conditions do not pertain widely, I certainly have no wish to defend or extenuate this particular situation in itself. On the contrary, I am glad of this opportunity to set forth with all frankness and emphasis my own position in regard to matters of this kind.

The circumstances described by Mr. Lynd have to do in part with hours of labor and in part with living conditions. On the basis of the facts in the matter, I trust there will be no misunderstanding either on the part of the responsible executives in the companies to which I may be related or on the part of the public at large as to my position on both of these questions.

I believe that generally speaking the twelve-hour day and the seven-day week should no longer be tolerated in industry, either from the viewpoint of public policy or of industrial efficiency; I believe that both have been proven to be unnecessary, uneconomic and unjustifiable. As a matter of general policy, subject only to the demands of occasional emergency, modern industry is justified in accepting the eight-hour day and the six-day week, as a labor



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JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, JR.

"The twelve-hour day and the seven-day week should no longer be tolerated. . . . I believe that both have been proven to be unnecessary, uneconomic and unjustifiable

standard toward which all the parties interested should steadily press. Even in those industries where the continuous process is an inevitable feature, the routine should be so adjusted that the employes can have at least one day's rest in seven and can obtain that share of leisure for self-development which accompanies the work-day of approximately eight hours. While the adoption of these standards may and doubtless will at first entail increased costs of production, I am confident that in the long run greater efficiency and economy will result, and that from the outset public opinion will support any industry which installs them. The same sentiment will eventually bring into line the less scrupulous and less enlightened elements in every competitive industry.

With regard to living conditions there can be even less room for argument or division of opinion among men of clear vision and humane mind. Even in isolated locations like mining camps, it is not only possible but necessary that reasonable provision should be made for the health, comfort and contentment of those who may labor there in behalf of the entire community. The oil fields, to be sure, suffer difficulties even greater than the coal mines, being not only temporary but speculative in their output. Even with this allowance the environment is certainly subject to amelioration and to such provision for home and recreational life as will promote the well being of all those concerned.

I have never believed that these things should be provided for working men and women either as a result of chance generosity or deliberate paternalism. Quite aside from the fact that, in my judgment, they represent the soundest economic policy, they are due the employe as a matter of common justice, required by the basic fact that man is a human being first and a member of industry afterward. As a private citizen and individual stockholder, I have never hesitated to state my position on these points with all the clearness at my command. I have not wittingly lost an opportunity—so far as a minority stockholder may do so—to reinforce my position on the general policy with action that would be most

concrete and adequate. I have done so, moreover, where changes urged by me involved competitive burdens and consequent anxiety to responsible managers, but I have never seen reason to regret any advance thus obtained or to modify the grounds on which they were urged. On the contrary, I would reaffirm the belief that sooner or later all such added burden is balanced by the increased efficiency and contentment of the laboring force and that less generous directors of industry in due time will inevitably follow the same course, if not through choice then under compulsion of public opinion.

In pursuance of this policy, some of the problems which have to be faced and many of the evils which should be removed are deeply rooted, sometimes within the processes of an entire industry. To my mind, however, where the right course is clear, difficulties in the way do not excuse inaction, but rather should inspire a more vigorous determination. So far as concerns the discharge of my own responsibility as a stockholder for better industrial conditions and relations, I have made special provision for assistance in just such tasks as these, which are sometimes onerous, often perplexing, but always close to my heart. To that end I welcome every aid from whatever source, as men of like mind and common purpose try to raise industry to a level of public service and thereby to make the world a better place for all men to live in.

[Mr. Rockefeller's letter reflects the straightforward attitude which he has repeatedly taken in matters of this sort during recent years. He points out, as I myself do in the course of my article, that certain conditions, such as the drinking water problem, are due to the peculiar isolation of the Elk Basin field. I must protest, however, at his including such conditions as the seven-day week and the twelve-hour day among "the unhappy circumstances apparently surrounding this single field" which "are in marked contrast with those in other branches of the industry, and especially those in less difficult producing areas." As I have tried to make explicit in more than one place in the article, Elk Basin is in no sense unique either in the matter of hours worked per day or days worked per week—in fact, quite the contrary, it is entirely typical of the oil fields generally, with the exceptions noted in the article. The whole drab story is set forth in detail in Bulletin No. 297 of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics on Wages and Hours of Labor in the Petroleum Industry, published in April, 1920, and to be had for the asking from the Government Printing Office in Washington.—R. S. L.] See editorial on next page.



Detail of a section of the Elk Basin field—typical in its barrenness.

OIL has meant stupendous fortunes for some; it has meant light and heat and motive power for the countless thousands. But when it comes to the producing regions themselves, Mr. Lynd is on altogether sound footing when he warns Mr. Rockefeller and the readers of Mr. Rockefeller's statement against any assumption that the working schedule which Mr. Rockefeller calls intolerable, unnecessary, un-economic and unjustifiable, is in any sense a condition confined to the small tract in Wyoming. With the exceptions noted, it is common practice throughout the producing fields of the west. They have extended the gruelling demands of the long shift at the expense of health and fair living and household integrity wherever in the west the hidden veins of one of the great natural resources of the new world and the new industrial age have been tapped. Nor have the refineries of the east, with their marked advances in labor administration in recent years wholly rid themselves of its bane.

MOREOVER, the general economic setting of Elk Basin and the other producing oil fields should be kept clearly in mind. That setting is not barren, isolated or difficult. If the communities concerned were wringing a scant existence from a southern mountain side or a worn-out New England farm, we should have one picture before us. But, quite the contrary, they are communities whose daily toil is an essential part of the richest production operations in America.

As this issue goes to press, Wall Street is witnessing another scramble for Standard Oil stocks, with various securities of the Standard Oil group touching new high levels. Within a fortnight six different companies have cut ponderous "melons"—the Standard of New Jersey declaring a stock dividend of 400 per cent, the Vacuum Oil Company and Ohio Oil Company, both Standard and both 300 per cent stock dividends, Standard of New York a 200 per cent stock dividend, and the Standard of California a 100 per cent stock dividend, which, with the earlier Standard Oil Company of Kentucky stock dividend of 33 1/3 per cent—makes seven such transactions within a year.

This makes 1922 the best "melon" year for the Standard Oil group since 1913, when nine such stock distributions were made; 1916, 1917 and 1920 each witnessed three Standard Oil stock dividends, while there were two each in 1915 and 1912 and one each in 1914 and 1921.

It should not be overlooked, of course, that in addition to the above stock dividends [to quote from the New York Times]:

... Standard Oil units . . . since the old New Jersey company was split up in 1911 as a result of a Supreme Court decision . . . have distributed more than \$1,000,000,000 in the form of cash dividends.

THESE facts are not set down as a text for discussing profits or the question of public policy involved in the Federal Supreme Court decision which freed stock dividends from taxation as income. They have another significance which bears directly on the facts of life and labor revealed by Mr. Lynd. It is pertinent in the light of his experience to note the presence of both the Standard of Indiana and the Ohio Oil Company in the above listings. The first of these, the Standard of Indiana, holds the record for having declared the great-grandfather of all stock dividends, 2900 per cent in 1912, followed in 1920 by another modest 150 per cent dividend. The recent activity of Ohio Oil in the market—its stock has reached 350—throws into stark relief the letter from Mr. McFadyen of the Ohio Oil Company cited by Mr. Lynd in which he withdrew on August 16

of the current year his offer to contribute towards a community house in Elk Basin because "the price of oil has gone off so that it is necessary for us to curtail expenses wherever we can." The Ohio Oil Company had been asked to contribute \$500! The increase in the capital stock of the Ohio Oil Company, announced as this issue goes to press, is to be from \$15,000,000 to \$60,000,000. "The present disbursement," says the New York Times, "will mean a breaking up of part of one of the largest surpluses among the Standard Oil companies." Mr. Lynd has been repeatedly assured in the conferences with various representatives of the oil companies concerned which preceded the writing and publication of his article that the entire Standard Oil block of thirty-three companies control only approximately a quarter of the crude production, half of the refining and two-thirds of the pipe lines in a highly competitive industry and therefore were in no position to take the initiative in such matters as abolishing the twelve-hour day. In view of the well known fact that the independent companies follow in the main the retail price standards set up by the Standard Oil companies in the various sections of the country, and in the light of the extravagant profits which the latter are deriving, and even admitting that they cannot directly influence working conditions in competing fields, it would certainly appear that the powerful Standard Oil companies must stand naked at the bar of public opinion in the matter of the twelve-hour day and the seven-day week until they set their own house in order.

HERE it is that the statement of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., has unprecedented significance. With the rapid rise of corporate industry in the last fifty years, we have only begun to develop an ethics of industrial responsibility capable of meeting the stress of nation-wide production. Responsibility is scattered from stockholders and corporation headquarters through various stages of management and superintendence. Even the Sherman Act itself may be cited as a difficulty in placing responsibility completely enough on the ultimate owners of industry. In spite of his strategic position, his aroused sense of the stewardship of great wealth, his personal counsel on industrial and social as well as business matters, the case of Mr. Rockefeller, Jr., illustrates the common difficulty of finding a substitute for human contact. It took a year to get the facts of Elk Basin convincingly before him, up through the chambered nautilus of absentee capitalism.

In this situation the pressure on the men making operating decisions all along the line is for profits rather than for human values. In that we have, if one were needed, the justification of just such an arresting call upon public interest as Mr. Lynd makes from the field—a call fortified by his inescapable body of closely documented facts. The public cannot escape its share of responsibility, once the facts are known, any more than Col. Stewart and other oil company officials as well as all holders of Standard Oil securities can escape theirs. Mr. Rockefeller, within the bounds of one man's sphere of responsibility, attempts no such evasion, as his vigorous and challenging expression of leadership in the elimination of the twelve-hour day and the seven-day week from the oil industry indicates. He may not turn the other cheek to criticism, but he does not dodge where it lands. He comes back not at his critic but at the abuses criticized. His left hand may have been lame in neglecting hoary and untenable evils; but with his right he gives them a blow straight from the shoulder. Concerted action, in line with his challenging statement, on the part of other holders of oil stocks, large and small, could lift the oil fields from the category that has made the continuance of the long shift in steel an industrial disgrace.

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